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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 PRAGUE 000295

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STATE FOR EUR/NCE; CHARLES SHAPIRO, WHA/FO; CALEB MCCARRY,  
WHA/CCA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/20/2016  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [CU](#) [VE](#) [XM](#) [EZ](#)  
SUBJECT: CZECHS EXPRESS CONCERN FOR FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY IN  
VENEZUELA, CUBA, AND LATIN AMERICA GENERALLY

Classified By: Acting DCM Michael Dodman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

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[1](#). Summary  
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(C) On March 16, WHA PDAS Charles Shapiro met with representatives of Czech NGO People in Need (PIN), parliamentarians, MFA officials, and private citizens actively engaged in democracy promotion in Cuba. The Czechs expressed their commitment to Cuba and Latin America generally, and echoed U.S. concerns for the future of democracy in Venezuela. The MFA hosted a meeting for Shapiro of the LatAm Directors of the Visegrad-4 (the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary) to compare notes on Latin America. Shapiro invited them to participate in the proposed International Cuba Democracy Fund, to work for a stronger EU common position on Cuba, and to support Guatemala's candidacy for the GRULAC seat on UNSC. End summary.

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[2](#). People in Need (PIN)  
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(U) Note: PIN is the largest NGO in Central Europe, and is widely respected for its active promotion of human rights and democracy in Cuba, Belarus, Burma, Iraq, the Balkans and elsewhere. PIN is funded by the GOCR through the Czech MFA's Transformation Cooperation Unit (TRANS), and as well as by USAID, NED, the Westminster Foundation, the EU and by donations from private Czech citizens. Septel will describe current PIN projects in Cuba.

(C) PIN rep Igor Blazevic (Human Rights Director) explained that former President Havel established the Czech policy of active opposition to the Castro regime, a policy continued by the many Havel proteges now working at the MFA and in PIN. Blazevic noted the June parliamentary elections could possibly result in a minority government supported by the Czech Communist party, which could result in a change of the Cuba policy. In April the Czechs will invite to Prague both NGOs and foreign ministers from a number of countries active in COLAT, including Spain, with an eye toward influencing the EU common position on Cuba. Blazevic said some Latin American countries may be open to discussing the possibility of a transition to democracy in Cuba, but in his experience are more willing to speak freely if the U.S. is not present and U.S. Cuba policy is not a focus of the discussion. Blazevic said PIN is concerned about the situation in Venezuela, largely because of the connection to Cuba. While PIN is not active in Venezuela, it has met with Venezuelan NGOs such as Sumate.

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[3](#). Czech Parliamentarians  
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(C) Shapiro met with Vladimir Lastuvka (CSSD), Chair of the Foreign Relations Committee, and Petr Bratsky (ODS), an MP active on Cuba issues. Shapiro stated that the primary problem in Latin America is poverty and exclusion and that the U.S. wants to work with governments who wish to grow their economies, reduce poverty, and incorporate the marginalized into the political process. Shapiro said that we seek a democratic transition in Cuba, not a succession from

one communist regime to another. Referring to the thousands of Cubans who studied and worked in the now defunct Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, Lastuvka said Czechs feel a historic connection to Latin America and that he supports Czech and U.S. efforts to promote democracy in Latin America. Lastuvka was skeptical that democracy could thrive in the face of unrelenting poverty. Bratsky, a passionate supporter of Cuban democracy, said he visited Cuba the previous week and met with Cuban dissident Oswaldo Paya, other dissidents, and family members. He described the conditions in Cuba as appalling and getting worse. Both expressed concerns about how a transition in Cuba might unfold and feared violence.

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4. Meeting with V-4 Representatives  
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(C) After lunch with MFA Americas Directorate officials,

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Shapiro met with Jakub Skalnik, Director of the Americas Department, and his V-4 counterparts from the Americas Departments of the Slovakia (Director Dusan Kristofik), Poland (Deputy Director Jacek Hinz), and Hungary (Director Lajos Bozi). The V-4 representatives paid close attention to Shapiro's briefing on Latin America, which closely paralleled the agenda at the US-EU consultations on Latin America on March 13. Shapiro urged the V-4 countries to promote Guatemala's candidacy for the GRULAC seat on the UNSC.

-- On Venezuela, Shapiro urged the V-4 to meet actively in capitals and in Caracas with Venezuelan intellectuals, labor leaders, opposition politicians, and NGOs to "maintain political space."

-- Bozi spoke about the International Center for Democratic Transition in Budapest, which aims to share the Hungarian democracy transition experience with other countries in transition. The Center's director, Ambassador Gyarmati, will be looking for meetings in Washington the week of March 20.

-- Shapiro urged the V-4 countries to cooperate on Cuba. He mentioned a proposal made earlier in the day by Igor Blazevic of PIN to investigate the possibility of mobilizing Cuban youth groups. Shapiro also said the U.S. was prepared to contribute \$400,000 to the proposed International Cuba Democracy Fund. (Note: The fund was not discussed further, but the Czechs have previously expressed their support for it. End note.)

-- Hinz (Poland), Bozi (Hungary), and Kristofik (Slovakia) expressed their countries' support for the EU's "dual engagement policy" of dealing with both Cuban officials and dissident groups. Shapiro pointed out that as a practical matter, it not possible to engage with both groups in a meaningful way since the regime freezes diplomatic contacts when a country begins meeting with dissident groups. (Note: The Castro regime does not meet with officials from the Czech or Slovak Embassies in Havana for this reason.) Kristofik noted that Cuba had informed the Slovakian MFA without explanation that it intended to downgrade its embassy in Bratislava from Ambassador to Charge.

-- Hinz (Poland) criticized the Czechs for rejecting the Austrian proposal to hold two national day celebrations, the first for representatives of diplomatic missions and the Cuban officials, and the second for dissidents. Skalnik dismissed the second day as a "consolation day" that failed to provide adequate recognition for the dissidents.

-- All noted that Spain is attempting to pressure the Visegrad-4 by conditioning Spain's support for opening the EU labor market on "good behavior" on Cuba.

-- Skalnik requested information about U.S. plans to sponsor a draft Human Rights Resolution on Cuba in 2006.

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5. Comment  
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(C) The Czechs have the advantage of knowing a communist dictator when they see one. Promoting human rights and democracy internationally is a key element of Czech foreign policy. It is the focus of the MFA's Transformation Cooperation Unit \$1.3 million budget for 2006, as well as the Czech outreach in Cuba, Belarus, Burma and elsewhere. The day after Shapiro's visit PIN set up a prison cell on Wenceslas Square and politicians, including Foreign Minister Svoboda, took turns as political prisoners. On March 18, U.S.

Ambassador Cabaniss joined FM Svoboda and other Czechs who marched in support of Cuba's Damas en Blanco on the third anniversary of the arrest of their family members. The Czechs are strongly committed to Cuba, and seem willing to increase their engagement in Venezuela and Latin America generally. This may be a good time to seek opportunities for joint cooperation, such as by encouraging PIN to initiate capacity building projects in Venezuela, or by arranging contacts between activist Czech MPs and their Latin American counterparts to discuss their experience with democracy. End comment.

16. (U) PDAS Shapiro has cleared this cable.

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CABANISS